

THE ICONS OF BULGARIA

Front Cover: Christ the Great Prelate, St. Theophilus and St. John of Rila, 19th C., by Zahari Zograf, Plovdiv Art Gallery.

St. Theodore Stratilatus, 9th 10th C., a ceramic icon from the Patleina monastery, near Preslav, NHM.



THE ICONS OF BULGARIA

The Bulgarian icon has a thousand-year old history, related to two momentous events for our country.

In the year 865 the young Bulgarian state was the first among the Slavs to adopt Christianity as its official religion. From that time on the icon, as a practical object of the cult and the church rite, pioneered the development of Bulgarian art. It was after 865 that the young Christian state began to receive artists from the East who, together with the Byzantine missionaries, were to embellish the newly-built temples. Thenceforward Bulgarian icon-painting followed the traditions of Byzantine and Eastern-Orthodox art while at the same time it retained its national character

All this can be seen in the ceramic icons from the 9th and 10th century. These were mass-produced, as we know from the furnaces and workshops for glazed ceramic tiles discovered in the region of Patleina, near the old Bulgarian capital Preslav. Among the famous icons of those days is that of St. Theodor Stratilatus, 9th-10th centuries, made from 20 glazed tiles. It is done in the best artistic traditions of the Orient (Cappadocia, to be more precise) but the technique of painting is original: it was not known in the East then. Thus the art of the First Bulgarian State has a share in the artistic achievements of Orthodox culture.

During the 13th and 14th centuries, in Turnovo, the capital city of the Second Bulgarian Kingdom, flourished the "golden age" of Patriarch Eftimii's literary reform. It had a strong bearing not only on Orthodox Slavonic Literature but on the Turnovo art school as well . The exceptionally fine frescoes in the rock temples near Ivanovo in the Rousse district are an example of the highest class of Bulgarian art of the Paleologus renaissance. Another example is the exquisite two-sided icon, a painting of professional artistry, presented around 1395 to the

chapel of the Poganovski monastery by Helen Paleologus, a granddaughter of the Bulgarian Tsar Ivan-Alexander.

The other event that had an impact on Bulgarian icon-painting was Bulgaria's tragic fall under the Ottoman invaders of Europe. Since 1393 the Bulgarian Church was deprived of the support and subsidies of the state and of its own patriarchate too. This had its bad influence on ecclesiastical painting, while the planned demolition of monasteries and churches irrevocably deprived us of very many icons. But what remains shows that even during the Ottoman domination (1396-1878) icon painting continued its development, uneven though it may have been, mainly along two lines.

One of them goes back to the good medieval traditions of Athos and the old Bulgarian monasteries – the Rila Monastery, the Bachkovo Monastery and other monasteries near Sofia, Plovdiv and Turnovo. With their spirited literary and educational work they aided not only icon painting but also the preservation of the Bulgarian ethos, its spiritual maturing and rise to the idea of national independence.

The other trend illustrates the bond between icon painting and national art, the folklore, the latter motivating to some extent the pronounced democratic character of the art of that time. The 17th century saw an economic upsurge in most Bulgarian towns. They turned out many goods for the market of the Ottoman Empire, they traded with Western and Central Europe. This progress naturally gave impetus to art. Many of the finest icons have come down to us from the thriving towns of that time – Nessebur, Plovdiv, Turnovo, Etropole, Vratsa, Lovech – which were also centres of art.

The eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries mark the triumph of the National Revival and Enlightenment; national art schools were founded in some of those towns: the Samokov, the Tryavna, the Bansko and the Strandja art schools, each bearing its own specific character and technique. We associate with those schools the names of some painters: Hristo Dimitrov, Zahari Zograf, Stanislav Dospevski from Samokov; Papa Vitanov and Zahari Tsanyov from Tryavna; Toma Vishanov and Dimiter Molerov from Bansko; Alexo Odrinchanin and Nikola Konstantinov from Strandja. Their remarkable works of art are landmarks in the history of the art of all Orthodox Balkan peoples. Zahari Zograf painted in the Great Monastery St. Athanasius in Athos, the Strandja master-painter Mitrophan Zograf – in the St. George in the Sveta Gora Zograf monastery, Ditcho Zograf and other painters from Debur painted in a number of churches in the south-eastern Balkan countries. True to new Revival outlook, they all transformed the rigid canonical painting into a life-asserting art, viewing reality and replacing the austere, stringent colours by bright and gay hues.

The Bulgarian icon lived through thevicissitudes of a small but ardent Balkan nation. The achievements of that art, which has been created and mastered for ten centuries now, judged on their merits today – the exhibitions of Bulgarian icons aroused enormous interest in Paris and London, in Moscow and Leningrad, in Tokyo and Mexico...

Today, having taken its befitting place in the national museums and galleries, the icon, with its silent and composed grandeur, takes us into a remote world of grace and beauty. It is the evidence of the Bulgarian contribution to the pan-Orthodox art and culture.

ABBREVIATIONS:

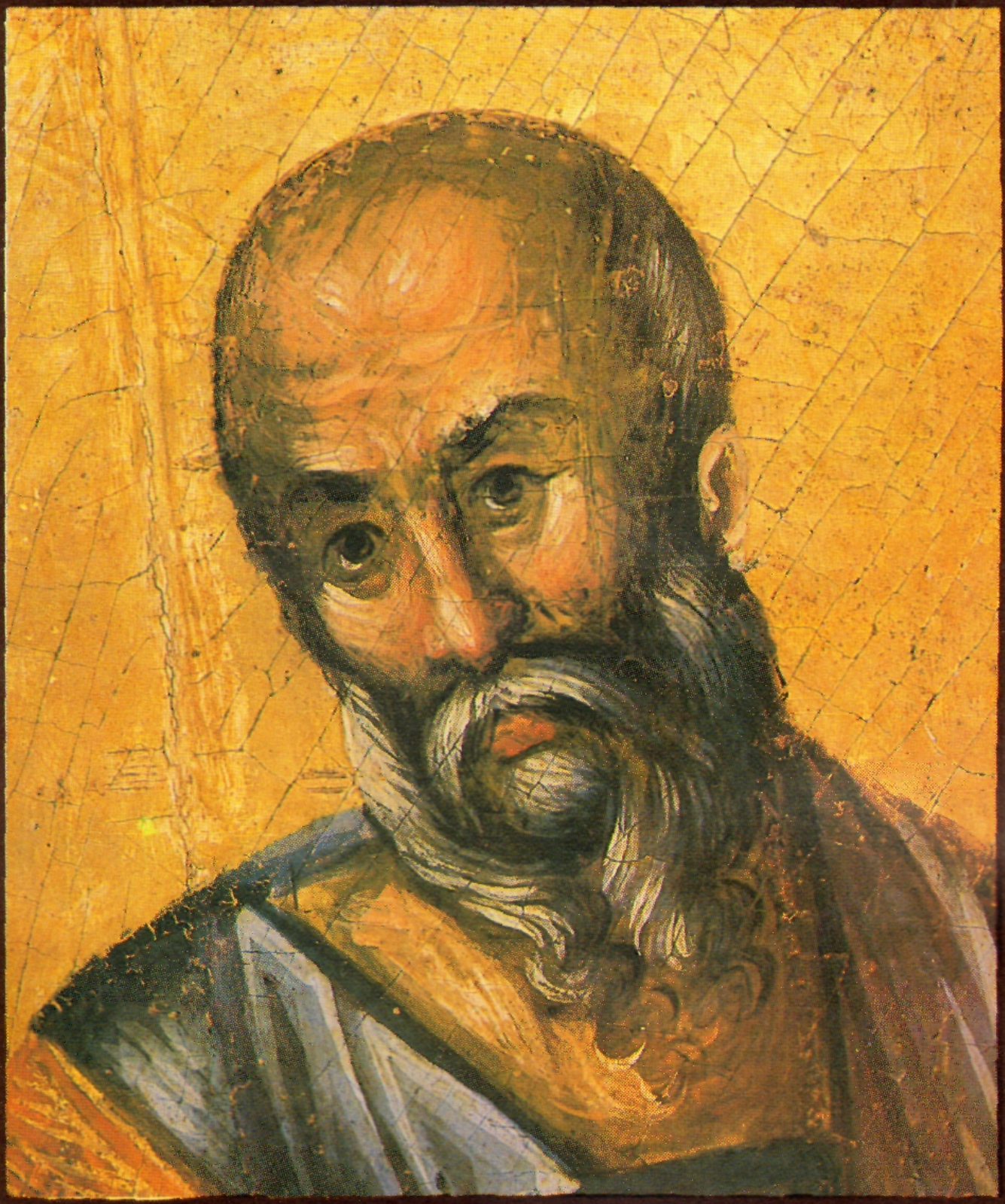
NAG – National Art Gallery
CHAM – Church History and Archaeology Museum
NHM – National History Museum



Christ Pantocrator, 14th C., from Bulgarevo, near Bourgas, CHAM.



The Vision of the Prophet Ezekiel – a two sided icon, from 1395, presented to the Poganovski monastery by Helen Paleologus, NAG.



John the Theologian – a detail from "John the Theologian" and "The Katafigi Virgin Mary" – the other side of the 1395 two sided icon from the Poganovski monastery, NAG.



The Katafigi Virgin Mary – a detail from the 1395 two sided icon from the Poganovski monastery, NAG.



The Hodigitria Virgin Mary with Hagiographic Scenes, 16th C., from a two-sided icon, on the back: the Crucifixion, CHAM.



The Crucifixion from a two-sided icon from 1541, from Sozopol; on the back side: The H-Odigitria Virgin Mary, CHAM.



Christ's Crucifixion, 15th 16th C., from Arbanassi, near Turnovo, CHAM

St. George and St. James on Horseback, an embossment icon of the 16th C., from Sozopol, CHAM.



The Prophet Elijah's Ascension; St. Theodore Stratilatus, 16th C., part of an iconostasis frieze, from Peshtera, NHM.





Trinity of the Old Testament, 1598, painted by Zograf Nedyalko from; from the Etropole monastery, NHM.





The Hodigitria Virgin Mary, 16th 17th C., CHAM
Christ's Birth, 16th 17th C., CHAM.
Part of an iconostasis frieze with Apostles, 16th 17th C., CHAM





St. Athanasius the Great, 16th 17th C., from Plovdiv, CHAM



King's Gate from an iconostasis, 17th C., from Arbanassi near Tur novo.



The Annunciation, 16th 17th C., from Prissovo near Turnovo, CHAM.

St. George on horseback kills the dragon, 1667, from the Kremikovtsi monastery near Sofia, NAG.

Christ's Transfiguration, 17th C., from Vlashko near Vratsa, CHAM.







St. Katherine with Hagiographic Scenes – end of 17th C., from Plovdiv, Plovdiv Art Gallery.



St. Constantine and St. Helena, 17th 18th C., CHAM.

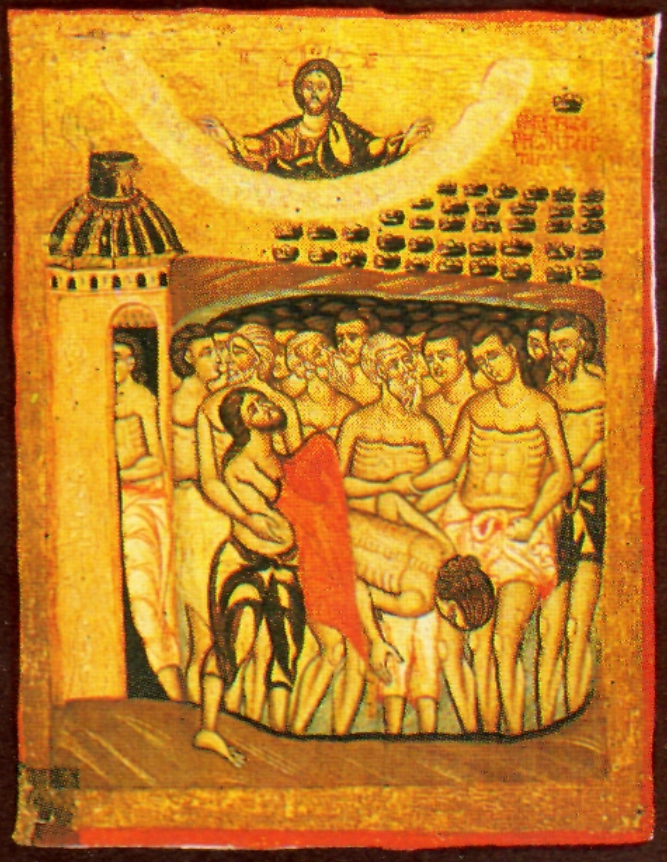
St. Elijah in the cave, 18th C., from southern Bulgaria, Plovdiv Art Gallery.



Christ's Transfiguration, 1715, painted by Panayot Zograf, CHAM.

St. 40 Martyrs, circa 1730, from the Rozhen monastery, CHAM.







. St. Minas, 18th C., from Polatovo near Plovdiv, Plovdiv Art Gallery.

St. John of Rila, end of 18th C.; from the Rila Monastery, National Museum – the Rila Monastery.





Christ's Birth, 19th C., Tryavna school, Plovdiv Art Gallery.



Christ's Ascension, 1831, painted by Dimiter Zograf, the Samokov school, Plovdiv Art Gallery.



The Three Handed Virgin Mary, St. Nicholas, St. Konstantine and St. Helen and St. Charalampios 1832, by Zograf Toma, from southern Bulgaria, Plovdiv Art Gallery.



The Rev. Elijah's Ascension with Hagiographic Scenes, 19th C., from southern Bulgaria. The Plovdiv Art Gallery.





St. Tryphonos, 19th C., from Plovdiv, painted by Zahari Zograf, Samokov school, CHAM.

St. George the New (of Yanina), 19th C., from the church in Kouklen, near Plovdiv. Plovdiv Art Gallery.



The Hodigitria Virgin Mary, St. Joseph and St. John of Rila, first half of the 19th C., painted by Dimiter Molerov, the Bansko school, National Museum – the Rila Monastery.



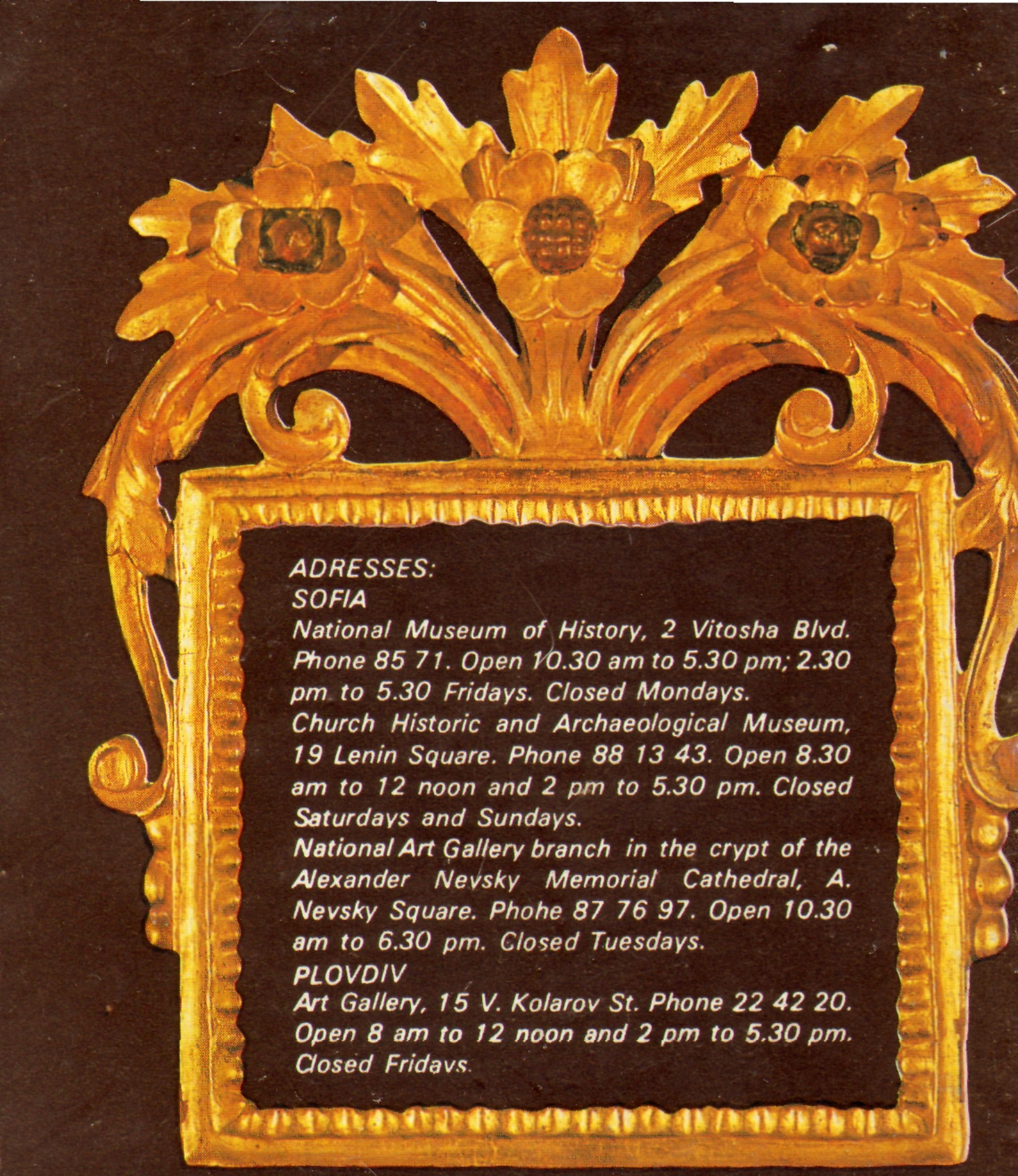
Two Scenes from the Six day Creation, 19th C., Tryavna school, the Troyan Monastery.



The Virgin's Birth, middle of the 19th C., by Dimiter Zograf, Samokov school, the Troyan Monastery.



The Birth of John the Prophet, 1870, painted by Stanislav Dospevski from Samokov, Plovdiv Art Gallery.



ADRESSES:

SOFIA

National Museum of History, 2 Vitosha Blvd. Phone 85 71. Open 10.30 am to 5.30 pm; 2.30 pm to 5.30 Fridays. Closed Mondays.

Church Historic and Archaeological Museum, 19 Lenin Square. Phone 88 13 43. Open 8.30 am to 12 noon and 2 pm to 5.30 pm. Closed Saturdays and Sundays.

National Art Gallery branch in the crypt of the Alexander Nevsky Memorial Cathedral, A. Nevsky Square. Phohe 87 76 97. Open 10.30 am to 6.30 pm. Closed Tuesdays.

PLOVDIV

Art Gallery, 15 V. Kolarov St. Phone 22 42 20. Open 8 am to 12 noon and 2 pm to 5.30 pm. Closed Fridays.

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